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THE POSSIBILITIES OF ETHICAL INSTRUCTION THROUGH LITERATURE.

To insure a common point of view, it may be well to define the term ethical instruction as it will be used in this paper, and to say a word about the types of literature best suited to give that instruction. First, then, we shall consider the possibilities of ethical instruction through literature to mean the opportunities afforded of leading pupils to discover how the ideas expressed or the situations created by authors conform to or deviate from the moral law; to reject the base or the false; to accept and to ponder the good, and, so far as possible, to convert it into action in their daily lives so that they may grow steadily in strength of will and in power to exercise right judgments in times of moral crises. Second, in order to make sure that the matter read shall be worthy of such close scrutiny, we should choose for class study books which, though they are within the power of pupils to master, are yet sufficiently difficult to tax their mental energies—one really comprehends only what he has already outgrown—and we should choose them not because they are easy and pleasant either for pupils to read or for us to teach, but because they contain sentiments of high principle and exalted purpose, uttered by men and women whose right to guide and to inspire has stood the test of time. The novel of the day may have its place in our general scheme; the newspaper, the magazine, the vocational treatise—these certainly have their place, but that place is in the supplementary, or home reading, assignment, not in the precious formative period of thirty or forty minutes three or four times a week. Reading confined to these types,

dealing, as we must admit they do deal, with the ephemeral, the dexterous, the merely mechanical or material, leads to lasting childishness of mind and of spirit unless counterbalanced by much which, just beyond the point of easy comprehension at the present moment, compels concentration, is replete with suggestion, starts the play of intellectual imagination, and incites to noble action. Whatever does this will prove in the end both profitable and delightful. "What gives pleasure is of little moment; what gives wisdom is all-important." Moreover, I have yet to meet the high-school class, be it college preparatory or commercial, be it 90 per cent. Americans of at last the third generation or 90 per cent. children of parents foreign-born, who could not be interested—in the best sense of that much-abused word—in the work of a master, provided that work were taught aright.

The ethical laws possible of consideration in such literature may be grouped under three heads: first, those relating to the development of individual character and to the far-reaching effects of deeds which, to the unreasoning man, seem likely to affect only the doer; second, those relating to the development and management of human society; third, those relating to God's dealings with men, including the destiny of nations and of individuals.

The ethical purpose of any course, it is hardly necessary to say, should not be announced to pupils, nor should difficult problems be attempted too early. In the first two years pupils have to be taught to follow the steps of a long plot, to discriminate between matters of little import and those of greater moment, and teachers have to question them about the order of events, the purpose of incidents and episodes. But even with all this, to a limited extent the kind of reading is possible which Cardinal Newman says is alone worth the while: "There can be no enlargement of the mind," he declares, "until we compare and systematize our views." First-year pupils can begin the search for motives, can compare the weakness and the strength of characters, can find the point in novel or story or drama or poem, where the individual or the group is confronted with its deed, and forced to make a decision, and they can follow the consequences of that decision to its inevitable result; then,

from all this they can draw conclusions as to the right or wrong of it all.

In "Julius Caesar," for instance, classes delight in studying the conflict between the two factions, one representing the old form of government, which the people have come to regard as intolerable but for which they themselves are powerless to find a remedy, the other representing the new form, the spirit of which is embodied in one man whose body the conspirators destroy but whose ideals live on and become really a greater power after his death than before. They like to feel the tremendous force, even in those days, of an aroused and discontented populace, and the efforts of politicians—Caesar first, then Brutus and Cassius, then Antony—to conciliate and convince that people; and they can analyze, too, the reasons why these leaders failed or succeeded. They can begin the study of mob psychology, and, by comparing that Roman mob with mobs of later days—down indeed to the very hour of this study—they will find that big gatherings of excited people do not follow their individual judgments but sway this way and that at the behest of their leaders; that what such a gathering decides, does, depends wholly upon whether these leaders are selfish, unscrupulous, studied in the arts of speech which they pervert to their own corrupt ends, like Antony of old, or whether they are magnanimous, controlled by conscience, simple in speech because sincere, like that great soul who, at the peril of his life, once faced an angry multitude and quelled their unreasoning passion with that never-to-be-forgotten single sentence: "Fellow citizens, God reigns and the government at Washington still lives." They can see that every deed bears within itself the elements of retribution or reward, whether that deed concerns a person, a party, or a nation; and they can appreciate the distinction between a violent and a tragic death.

When "Silas Marner" has been read rapidly for the story, the necessary rereading can be secured not by assigning chapters or pages, but by giving a series of problems that will send pupils again and again to the text and at the same time unfold to them a world of vicarious experience, and exercise their judgments about human relations. One problem may be a study of wills; the stubborn, the steady, the headlong, the shiftless, the

vacillating—this last, in the person of Godfrey, one of the best lay sermons possible for children of this age, showing as it does Godfrey's blind reliance upon Chance; his tendency to shirk responsibility, to temporize with truth, honor, simple duty, in order to avoid momentary unpleasantness; and the fatal net, woven of his wrongdoings, in which he and all whom he ever loved were finally caught. The question, "What do you think of George Eliot's definition of a lady, and how do you suppose she would define a gentleman?" will bring animated discussion and invite the reading to the class by the teacher of Lowell's "My Love" and Newman's "Definition of a Gentleman." Such an assignment as "Make a list of all slight sins, the mere faults even, that led to moral degradation or to actual crime," will drive home to more than one heart the truth that all great vices have their roots in minor offences against the laws of God. Again, consideration of the effects of little kindnesses, of the sweet fragrance of homely virtues, of the value to the soul of suffering and deprivation, of the joy of the simple faith that asks God for no sign but is content to "trusten to the end"—can not fail to leave impressions deep and true.

Thus, through the representation of right ideals, the great dramas, the poetry, the prose of these first years of high school must inspire noble emotions. But, as studies educate only to the degree that they react, the teacher's part does not end with giving lessons of this kind. She must help pupils to strengthen that "driving power of life," the will, by seeing to it that in the daily work of the classroom they put into acts the emotions, the desires, the resolutions inspired by their reading.

In the last two years, when most pupils yet question what their life work shall be, ethical training ought to be very definite, very practical. Whether these pupils are college preparatory or commercial matters little to the teacher of literature, whose office it is to form them to the habit of attention and reflection; to impart to them faith, hope, courage, determination; to make them feel that character is everything, that the formation of character is the real business of life, and that, this attended to, they may aspire to what they will. "If a man's chief aim," says a great scholar, "is to build up his own being, to make his mind luminous, his heart tender

and true, his will steadfast, who but God can fix a limit beyond which he may not hope to go?"

The consideration first in importance for these boys and girls is the choice of a vocation. What help can literature give? When Gareth's mother, in the "Idylls of the King," urges him to take the easy course,—avoid the perils of war, stay at home, marry advantageously, follow the deer, he exclaims,

"Man I am grown, man's work must I do.
Follow the deer? Follow the Christ, the King!
Live pure, speak true, right the wrong, follow
the King—
Else wherefore born!"

Was Gareth's idea right? What motives should guide me in choosing a vocation? Should I ask myself, What will be most easy, bring me most money, advance me most rapidly? Or, like Gareth, Wherefore was I born, Whither am I going, What work was appointed for me in the beginning, which, if I find it and do it well, will best help me to "live pure," that is, to fulfil the end for which I was created; to "speak true," that is, to respect myself and to command the respect of my fellowmen; to "right wrong," that is, to do what in me lies to help those in need, to further every good cause, and, dying, to leave the world a little better for my small service to it?

Each of these topics suggests others. What did Gareth's choice cost him? Is sacrifice usually the price of consecrated service? Do you know Milton's sonnet for his twenty-third birthday, and the story of his life? What other similar instances can you mention? These questions lead naturally to the reading of biography—not wholly, nor even largely, cumbersome lives of great men of ancient times, but magazine and newspaper sketches of present-day leaders of our own and other lands. They lead, too, to discussions about success: how it should be measured; what men have to endure for it—training long and hard, self-discipline, infinite attention to details, patience, long-suffering, loneliness of soul. Is devotion to a cause worth while? Why wear out life in toil and hardship, when material reward is not assured? Why "stand for the right with two or three" if humiliation or defeat seems inevitable? Why renounce pleasures that others take, in order to do what these refuse to be bothered with? A great poet has something to say about this; let's

read together Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty." Who of the "Round Table" were successful, even in part? Make a list of the most glaring character defects that hindered the others from attaining success: lack of personal integrity; scorn of purity and chastity; the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake; failure to see that wherever we are, whatever we have, our happiness depends upon our thoughts, our ideals, and that these take their color from the soul in which they dwell; above all else, sensual sins, which dull spiritual insight, stifle conscience, and kill the capacity for pure friendship and holy love.

The mention of friendship and love opens a wide field for ethical instruction of grave significance. There is hardly a phase of either, proper for class discussion, that may not be reverently treated during the reading of the "Idylls." The story of Arthur and Guinevere should be treated as a unit, and traced step by step from that mistake of the father who gave his consent to the marriage of his daughter not because Arthur was an honest man and brave, but because he was a King, down to the penitential cry of that daughter, the wife disgraced,—

"Oh, my God,

What might I not have made of thy fair world,

Had I but loved thy highest creature here?

It was my duty to have loved the highest!

It surely was my profit had I known:

It would have been my pleasure had I seen,

We needs must love the highest when we see it."

Pupils should be lead to see that Arthur, though he takes to himself no share in Guinevere's wrong-doing, was not blameless, for it was part of his duty to guard her honor and to strive to retain her love; to see that her downfall was the result of selfishness, in reckoning only on the honor and happiness she expected to gain through marriage with a man of noble destiny instead of counting the cost of such a union, the obligations it imposed, the sacrifice it should entail. This is a good time for reading noble love poems, those in the "Golden Treasury" and others by English and American poets, hardly one of whom has not pictured his ideal woman and said something worthy on a subject of absorbing interest in this adolescent period. It is the time, too, for such books as Grayson's "Adventures in Friendship," Hugh Black's

"Friendship," Drummond's "Greatest Thing in the World," Emerson's essays on these two topics, and others for which no compulsion is necessary.

In order to have time for lessons of the kind merely hinted at in this paper, the teacher has to encourage the pupils to read quickly, to get to the end of a book in much less time than is ordinarily allowed, and she has to secure an eagerness not only to solve ethical problems but to formulate many for themselves, as also a willingness to contribute to class discussions such thoughts as they may have, by way of questions, answers, opinions. She has also to make wise use of supplementary reading lists and of reports of this reading. The former should be sufficiently comprehensive to make appeal to wide varieties of taste. The latter should hardly be twice of the same nature, and never of the stilted, stereotyped form. Sometimes it whets interest if the teacher herself chooses books for individuals. For instance, the other day, after a class which had been studying essays had completed the "Essay on Burns," I assigned some written work for the period. Then, calling each girl to the desk, I said, "This is the book I have chosen for your next reading. I think you will like it, but if, after a fair trial, you find that you don't, come to me and we'll try another." Then, turning to the Table of Contents, I ran rapidly through them, saying a word about the papers or chapters I thought she might best begin with. "You'll like Hazlitt on 'Nicknames,'" I said to one. "I'm sure 'twill give you an idea for your next theme." To a girl who had gained much from Carlyle's essay, I gave Larned's "Study of Greatness in Men." "It's a bit hard," I told her, "but you have shown such maturity of judgment in our discussions the past month that I think this will not be too much for you. See how Larned would measure greatness; then read his analysis of either Cromwell or Napoleon, and then of either Washington or Lincoln." Among the other books given out were Bennett's "Mental Efficiency"; Briggs' "Girls and Education"; Miss Call's "Freedom of Life" and "Conduct of Life"; Dr. Crothers' "Pardoner's Wallet," and "Gentle Reader"; Miss Dunn's "Cicero in Maine"; Emerson's "Conduct of Life," and both series of his essays; Higginson's "Atlantic Essays", "Essays and Essay Writing" and both volumes of Contributor's Club essays published by the "Atlantic Monthly"; Father Donnelly's

"Chaff and Wheat and a Few Gentle Flailings," Chesterton's "Tremendous Trifles," Miss Repplier's "Essays in Idleness," Mabie's "My Study Fire," Marie Van Voorst's "Woman Who Toils," Booker Washington's "Up from Slavery," and Canon Sheehan's "Under the Cedars and the Stars." The required part of this reading is being done in the class period, while I have individual conferences about a long theme assignment. The girls are free to communicate, to share a bit of humor with some one near them, to exchange books for a few minutes, or to ask, "Do you agree with this?" When the time comes for reports, these will be given in group form—three groups, changing every ten minutes, so that there may be as wide a distribution of views as possible. When I asked the other day, "Have you done any reading in your books outside of class, girls?" every one answered in the affirmative, and two who had been given what they termed "easy books," had finished them, and asked for something else.

What may we hope to accomplish by four years of ethical instruction in literature? While we may not expect to teach morality, we may hope to counteract to some extent the negligible moral effects of those studies in the curriculum that contribute merely to culture of the intellect, "which," says Herbert Spencer, "is hardly at all operative upon conduct." Certain other things we ought to be able to do, all tending to inculcate a love of virtue, to correct the prevalent lack of devotion to the duty of the moment, to change what an economic writer says is the cause of nine-tenths of the failures of life—"a vacillating, indifferent, flippant attitude." We may reasonably hope to accomplish, I think, five things:

1. To broaden the vision of our pupils, making them "aware of wider horizons" than they have ever glimpsed before;
2. To bring to them the vicarious knowledge of such problems in human life as they themselves may some day have to deal with;
3. To start them in the habit of making relative judgments in regard to these problems, and so to project their imaginations into the future as to estimate the probable outcome of a given or a possible course of conduct;

4. To help them to see that there are joys of the mind—of investigation, of reflection—in making the consideration of political or moral or sociological questions a really personal matter; a joy in getting acquainted with their own minds; a joy in making those minds “fair and pleasant friends for every hour of loneliness and gloom;”

5. To make them acquainted with a few great thinkers, and through these to help them to recognize the power and the necessity of maturity of mind, of increasing growth in spiritual stature.

In a little lyric that children like, telling how to find four-leaf clovers, they are given one condition without which the directions will avail naught:

“But you must have faith, and you must have hope, and you must have love, you know,”

and these qualifications we teachers too must possess if we would find the four-leaf clover of success in this work. Of these three faith is the most elusive, the most easy to skip our hold. The boys and girls are so thoughtless, so careless, so absorbed in their pleasures! Sometimes we forget how young they are, and look for older heads than their shoulders yet can bear. Yesterday they were visibly moved by a reading of Wordsworth’s “Happy Warrior”; today, because the assignment was a bit harder than usual, they proved not to be warriors at all. It would be so much easier to teach them facts—to assign their reading by pages and chapters, then question them to see if they had done it, and punish them if they had not. What does all their enthusiasm amount to, if it doesn’t carry over every time? When moments like this come, as come they do to us all, I like to repeat some other lines of him who wrote “The Happy Warrior”,—

“And deem not profitless those fleeting moods
Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
That they are kindred to our purer mind
And intellectual life; but that the soul,
Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
Of possible sublimity, whereto,
With growing faculties, she doth aspire
With faculties still growing, feeling still
That whatsoever point they gain, they yet
Have something to pursue.”

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